

A decade of Cannabis Social Clubs in Belgium

Hitting the headlines?

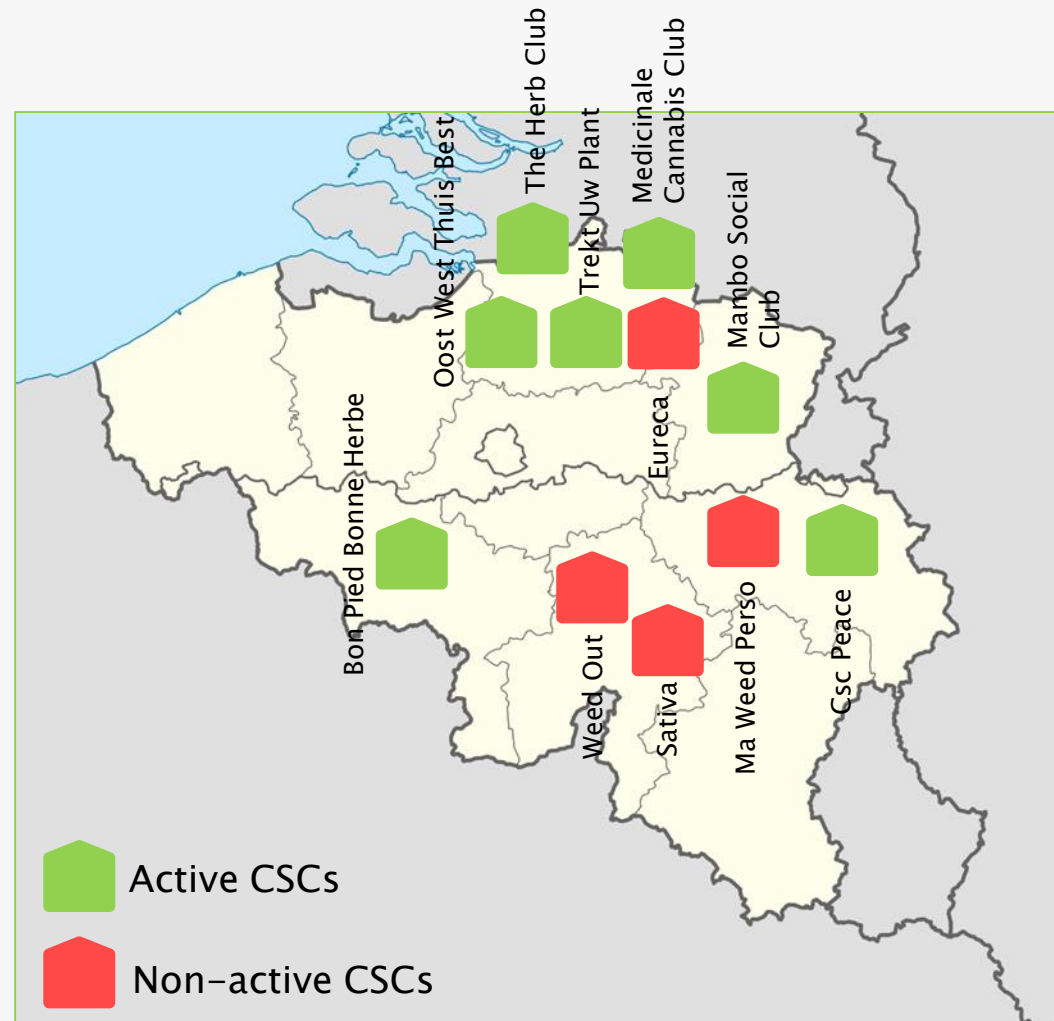
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Outline

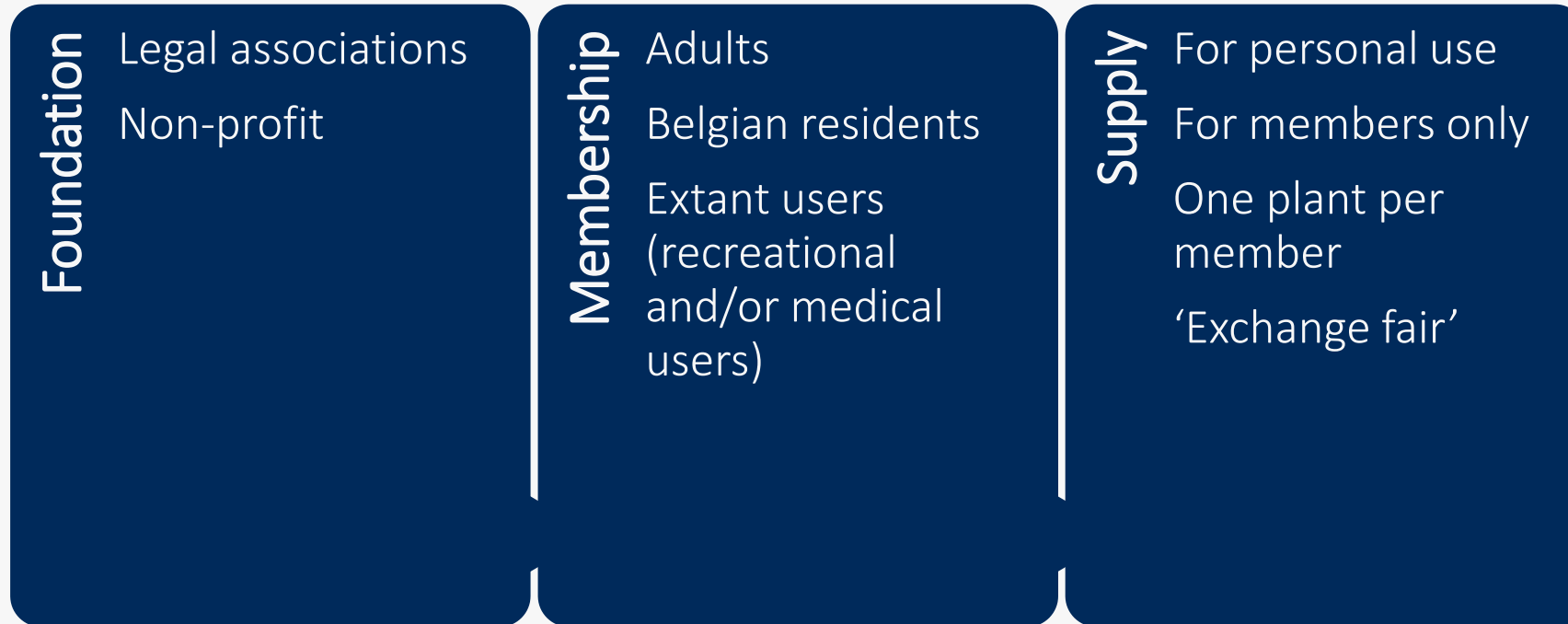
- ▶ Introduction to the Cannabis Social Club (CSC) model in Belgium
 - Snapshot of the CSC landscape in Belgium (BE)
 - Some of the key features of the Belgian CSCs
- ▶ Our approach: aim and methods
- ▶ Findings
 - General characteristics of media articles
 - Media representation of the CSC model in Belgium: focus on criminal justice issues
 - Key features of the Belgian CSCs are also depicted
 - Key sources for CSC news?
 - *They come when there is a cannabis plant...*: CSCs view on media coverage
 - Conclusions

A snapshot of the CSC landscape in Belgium

- ▶ The first Belgian CSC was established in 2006
- ▶ Some volatility
- ▶ No legislation specific to the model has been introduced



Some of the key features of the Belgian CSCs



- ▶ CSCs' self-regulatory efforts
- ▶ Specific practices may vary across CSCs

Our approach

- ▶ Ongoing research project (2015 – 2018, FWO)



- ▶ **Aim:** understand whether and how the Belgian CSCs have been portrayed by the domestic media

- ▶ **Methodology:**

Literature and document review

Content analysis
(Hughes et al, 2010)

Interviews with CSC
board of directors

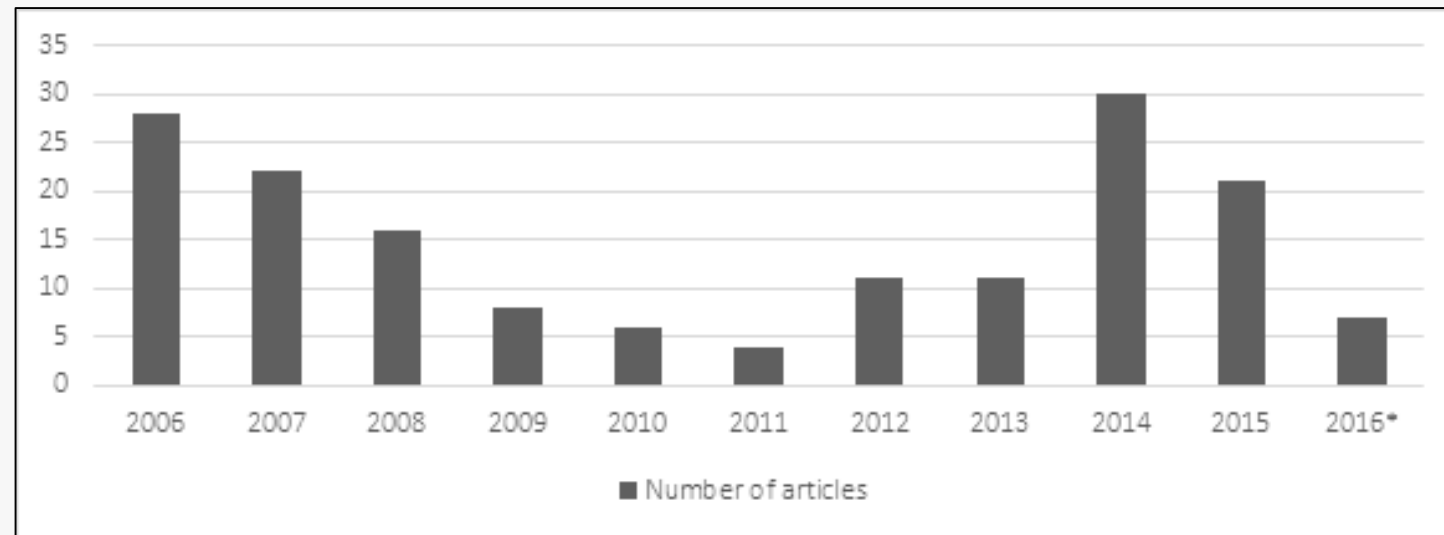
- Including internal documents of Belgian (BE) CSCs

- Printed BE media
- 12 key newspapers and magazines (Flemish & Wallonian)
- Time-frame: January 2006 - June 2016

- Semi-structured interviews
- 6 active BE CSCs
- 15 interviewees

General characteristics of the media articles

- ▶ 164 articles with at least one mention of CSC
- ▶ Limited coverage in the French-written press
 - n=25 in FR *vs.* n=139 in NL
- ▶ Awareness of the BE CSC landscape: 3 CSCs are often featured



Media representation of the CSC model in Belgium: focus on criminal justice issues

- ▶ Police interventions and court cases are heavily featured (‘priming’)
- ▶ Critique of ‘uncertain’ domestic legislation and calls for the introduction of new regulation
- ▶ Shift in the framing of the model
 - From ‘*cannabis plantation*’ or ‘*cannabis farm*’ to ‘*cannabis social club*’ (2010)
 - Reference to ‘*users’ organization*’ and to medical use of cannabis within the CSCs

“Many members of the social clubs are medicinal users. The advantage is that they can avoid the illegal circuit [...] these organisations made clear that cannabis cannot only be used for recreational purposes but also for medicinal purposes” (Flemish newspaper Het Belang van Limburg, 29 November 2014).

Key features of the Belgian CSCs are also depicted

Foundation

Legal associations
Non-profit

Membership

Membership criteria
(18+, BE resident,
user)
> Intake interview
> Membership fee

Supply

For personal use
For members only
One plant per
member
'Exchange fair'
> Price per gram

- ▶ Other public initiatives of the CSCs are featured too

Main sources for CSC news?

- ▶ CSCs' representatives as main sources of information
- ▶ Judges and public prosecutors often also contribute to news items
- ▶ Limited participation in news production by policy-makers and scientific experts

"[CSC Trekt Uw Plant] TUP needs to be prosecuted as they facilitate cannabis use" (Flemish newspaper Het Nieuwsblad, 14 April 2011)

"Drug problems are not solved by facilitating its availability" (Flemish newspaper Gazet van Antwerpen, 13 June 2013)

“They come when there is a cannabis plant...” : CSCs view on media coverage

- ▶ Only one CSC did not engage with the media (yet)
- ▶ CSCs adopted different strategies: proactively contacting media and/or waiting for contact
- ▶ Mixed views about media representation
 - Doubts about whether complexity of their activities/issues at stake is well captured
 - Critique of ‘sensationalist’ media:

“They come [...] when they can show a plant, when they can make a picture of somebody smoking. And they are very quick in down-bashing it [...] we were taken by the police, the next day on the newspaper it says: ‘They failed’, ‘Effort to legalize cannabis fails’, where it was not yet clear” (CSC3)

Conclusions I

- ▶ CSC model received some media attention – primarily addressing legal issues and thus creating a negative public image (e.g. Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; MacCoun and Reuter, 2001; Lenton, 2007)
- ▶ Shift in framing: moving from negative connotation, mention to CSC terminology, and medical characterization of the model
- ▶ Neutral depiction of CSC internal working (~Decorte, 2015; Pardal, ongoing)
- ▶ Despite ongoing (international) academic discussion, public and political debate about the model not yet initiated in Belgium

Conclusions II

- ▶ Opportunities for agenda-setting and an informed public and political debate in the long-term?
- ▶ Learning from the Uruguayan case: the opening of a *policy window*?
(Kingdon, 2002)

Thank you!

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